



Guidelines on Reporting on China



NATIONAL UNION OF
JOURNALISTS OF THE PHILIPPINES

The COVID-19 pandemic saw China using its media infrastructure to help shape global opinion and the narrative and, in some countries, this was helped along by friendly governments grateful for the help with procuring Personal Protective Equipment and coronavirus vaccines.

But China's efforts at soft power and media influence began even before the pandemic and has included training and exchange programs for journalists, media junkets and content-sharing agreements that "[feed] state-sponsored messages into the global news ecosystems," according to a 2020 study by the International Federation of Journalists.

In a newsletter in late 2021, disinformation researcher Clint Watts – senior fellow at the Center for Cyber and Homeland Security at George Washington University and the Foreign Policy Research Institute – notes that "China has grown its audience share globally ... through a different multi-pronged approach combining well-funded, overt state-run print, radio, and television media; a network of public-private partnerships; and a new generation of social media influencers softening the [Chinese Communist Party]'s image worldwide."

Without getting into geopolitics and the jockeying for control and influence among larger and more powerful economies, Filipino journalists will need critical thinking and healthy skepticism in engagements with and coverage of China.

It must be noted, thought that, these will also be essential in dealing with other countries' governments and even corporate brands.

With China's increasing influence in the region in general, and in the Philippines in particular, stories on China, its increasing engagement in the country, its foreign assistance, investments and loans and the long-running dispute over the West Philippine Sea will likely be staples in the news cycle.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put most of China's engagement with the media on hold but, with restrictions easing up, and with issues like the West Philippine Sea coming up again because of the May elections, here are some tips to keep in mind when covering or writing about China, its programs and its policies.

1 Promote Transparency and Accountability

Government transactions and contracts should always be transparent simply because it involves public funds.

Reporting on these allows public scrutiny of deals that the government enters into and informs the citizenry on where their taxes go.

Foreign assistance loans and the infrastructure projects that they will fund are, of course, worthy of coverage. But it would be best to look into the details of these loans and projects to see if they will benefit the communities where they will be built or where the projects will be implemented and whether loans carry provisions that might be disadvantageous to the government.

In the case of some infrastructure projects, it would also be good to look into whether these need to be built at all.



2 Give space to marginalized sectors



Government projects should always benefit and uphold the welfare of the people, especially the marginalized sectors such as indigenous peoples, farmers and fisherfolk.

But in some cases, large-scale development projects affect their lives and infringe on their rights.

As journalists, it is our role to provide a platform to these parties to expose and humanize their plight.

In some cases, official narratives are also given more weight than those of communities affected.

In July 2021, for example, the Palace essentially called a Pangasinan fisherman a liar for saying fishers from their area have not been able to enter Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal because of the presence of Chinese Coast Guard vessels.

Panatag is inside the Philippine EEZ and continental shelf but the Philippines did not argue this point at the arbitral tribunal.

The 2016 ruling holds that Panatag is a traditional fishing ground and that fishers should not be barred from going there.



3 Don't be racist.

Amid rising tensions over the West Philippine Sea in 2019 and uncertainty over the COVID-19 virus in 2020, disinformation researcher Dr. Jonathan Ong noted that the Philippines was not exempted from “anti-China racist speech and conspiracy theory [that] surged in the global context.”

Ong said that while the coronavirus spread around the world, there was a “secondary contagion” of content on media and on social media that blamed people of Chinese descent and Chinese culture for the virus.

“The Philippines saw many incidents of physical altercations, parody and memes, racial slurs of ‘chingchong,’ and service refusals to mainland Chinese people unleashed by COVID-19,” he writes in an Internews report released in early 2019.

In 2019, as opposition candidates took an anti-China stance in response to the Duterte administration’s closeness with the Chinese government, Ong noted that statements, reports and online conversations “at times...slipped into racist expressions against Chinese people.”

Some newsrooms even ran stories about social media reports of Chinese nationals behaving badly in public, which may have been true but also tended to amplify resentment and hate towards the Chinese.



This has, at times, led to distrust and harassment of Chinese Filipinos whose families have been in the Philippines for generations.

Although the Philippines has an ongoing dispute with China over the West Philippine Sea, this tension should be confined to the Chinese government and its policies and statements.

Filipinos have a long history of cultural exchange with the Chinese and while frustration over sovereignty and sovereign rights is understandable, this is no excuse for racism and racist speech.

4 Maintain your independence



China's media outreach has come in the form of content sharing agreements like the one between state-run Philippine News Agency and Chinese state-run news wire Xinhua News Agency (New China News Agency).

This kind of arrangement is not unique to the Philippines, with similar deals also done in Serbia, Tunisia and Italy, according to the IFJ study.

These are not inherently problematic, either, but will also require gatekeeping to avoid potentially embarrassing instances like posting an editorial criticizing the 2016 ruling in the arbitration case the Philippines filed over China's claims in the South China Sea.

Media outreach can also be in the form of advertorials and advertising supplements. As with any paid content, these should be clearly labeled as such and should be distinguished from regular news content.

As with regular coverage, disclosures in stories done on reporting trips and media junkets will help maintain your and your newsroom's credibility.

As with regular coverage, sponsored airfare and accommodations should not dictate on how a story will be reported.

Like most news subjects, embassy officials and media liaisons will want you to report their side but, as journalists, we cannot be limited to just that side of a story.

A 2020 IFJ report noted that in cases of reporting trips and junkets, "the results have, in many cases, produced stories that faithfully echo Beijing's positions on issues ranging from the South China Sea to technological developments in China."

"These views, which echo China's talking points, are being repeated by many journalists from different countries, effectively changing the public opinion landscape towards China through local media."

The same holds true for any sponsored trip, which other countries' governments also offer and probably long before the Chinese government did: If maintaining editorial independence in stories will be potentially difficult, it may be best to consider declining the invitation.

5 Assert the Philippines' position: The West Philippine Sea is ours

Tensions over the South China Sea – the part within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone is called the West Philippine Sea – have increased over the past decades and so has the media coverage of it.

The issue has dominated the headlines around the world, topping not only the security agenda of the region, but also great powers like the United States, Japan and Australia.

In the Philippines, developments in the resource-rich waters have been closely watched more than ever as China continues to militarize the area. It has been a subject of public discussions and debates, and a top concern in the upcoming May 2022 elections.

The West Philippine Sea dispute, hence, is no longer just a foreign-sounding news item that discusses conflict among nations.

With the looming power crisis and the continuing harassment of Filipino fishermen, the maritime row has become a vital issue for the Philippines; and the media plays a huge role in explaining its intricacies to keep the people informed of its importance.

But just how significant is the South China Sea?



The US Energy Information Agency estimates that the South China Sea holds about 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

In 2016, over \$3.37 billion worth of trade passed through the vital sea lane, while over 40 percent of the global liquefied natural gas transited in the area the following year, according to think-tank Council on Foreign Relations.

China has been claiming the vast majority of the South China Sea through its nine-dash line, which was junked by an arbitration court in 2016 in a case initiated by the Philippines.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration held that China's historical claims over the South China Sea – including the West Philippine Sea – do not have basis in international law.

While the ruling is unenforceable, the ruling is permanent and unappealable despite China's refusal to recognize it.

It is now recognized by several countries pushing for freedom of navigation in the highly disputed waters. And it is where the power

of the decision lies: nations can only use it to pressure Beijing to stop its incursions into other nations' waters.

It is important, hence, to highlight the Philippine position in our reports to uphold and respect the country's sovereignty.

